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Response Paper, “*The House of Mirth*”

In “*The House of Mirth*” by Edith Wharton, Ms. Lily Bart uses her beauty and cunning conversation skills to attempt to maintain her footing within her high society lifestyle. However the harsh reality that lies before her is that Ms. Bart is getting older and has more debt than income. Her only means of securing the type of life she has learned to expect is to marry a very wealthy man. Except each attempt to attract a man of high standing leaves Ms. Bart bored and moreover uninterested in the suitor she had attempted to win over, yet she chooses to deny the feeling she has for a man, Lawrence Selden, in her social class because he can’t offer her the lavish lifestyle she wants (48). I argue the “*The House of Mirth*” effectively establishes a model for the expectations of domesticity among upper class women in America (during the early twentieth century), where marriage, income, and social interactions are key factors connected to their success.

Throughout the novel, Wharton creates Ms. Bart as the woman who wants it all; the money the clothes and jewels, yet is reluctant to seal the deal. In the beginning of the story Bart and Selden have a mutual connection but she directly tells him that he is not an option for her (8). As they causally discus her life she says, regarding marriage, that she “threw away one or two good chances…you know I am horribly poor – and very expensive” (9). In this excerpt Bart reveals the loss she is at for rejecting the good offers of marriage when she had the chance and that she knows that her financial situation needs to be a sizable factor in her decision of who to marry. After her family fortune collapsed and the meager allowance from her Aunt all but gone Bart uses her feminine charm by looking “…so plaintively lovely as she proffered the request” to get her best friends husband, Mr. Trenor, to help her with investing her money in the stock market (73). This shows how women used the only resources they had, their looks and their tactical talking, to insure income that suits their needs, often by the seemingly innocent flirting and persuasion of married men.

Furthermore the social interactions of women in this novel directly influence the outcome of their future. As Ms. Bart ignores her a favorable suitor and attempts to change her basic personality (stopping playing bridge, and not smoking around Mr. Gryce) she becomes increasingly less interested and instead finds herself seeking out and enjoying the company of Lawrence Selden. Her interactions with Selden repeatedly hurt her chances of securing the type man and lifestyle she so desperately seeks. After the failure to secure Mr. Gryce as a husband, the expectations for a woman of Ms.Barts’ statute are clearly seen through Mrs. Trenor when she expresses her disapproval and disappointment of the whole situation, because Bart couldn’t stay attached to Mr. Gryce, even after all the work Trenor did to try and make Barts’ relationship work. Ultimately, “*The House of Mirth*” suggests that there are certain expectations for upper class women to be married, have a sustainable income and engage in the appropriate social intercourse, Ms. Lily Barts’ rejection to obtain these expectations results in personal hardships that she has to overcome and the rejection and mistreatment of others in her social class.

What compels Ms. Bart to be so close to her goals just to dodge them and avoid them at the last minuet? Many suitors that would suit her lifestyle needs have presented themselves to her, why does she strive for a lifestyle and social relationships that bore her just to reject an offer when it comes along?